

Credibility and the Standpoint Expectation

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ABSTRACT

When listeners consider a speaker's social identity or standpoint as evidence of their credibility on questions related to social issues, this practice is usually epistemically counterproductive. Though people's standpoints are relevant for understanding what it's like to occupy a social position, the practice of boosting or blocking a speaker's credibility on the basis of their standpoint is often misleading. The expectation that speakers will reveal their standpoints and that listeners will consider the speaker's standpoints when evaluating their claims is also burdensome for speakers who would rather conceal information about their standpoints.

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The standpoint expectation is the practice of granting or denying a speaker's credibility on a topic by revealing aspects of their identity, experiences, or their personal history of oppression. People meet this expectation when they frame an argument for their position by first disclosing the details of their standpoint within a broader system of social hierarchy. People enforce this expectation when they discount a person's argument because the arguer speaks from a standpoint that undermines their credibility on a particular subject.

The standpoint expectation evolved for several reasons. People increasingly recognize that people from marginalized backgrounds have experiences that are overlooked when only members of privileged groups are included in a conversation. As standpoint epistemologists argue, people can learn from the experiences

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of the oppressed. However, knowing whether a person occupies a privileged or oppressed standpoint can be difficult. People increasingly express themselves in online communities where their backgrounds and identities are less obvious to listeners unless they are explicitly stated. In this context, audiences can have difficulty evaluating claims where they lack information about the source. Creating a public persona as a speaker, writer, or activist that includes information about one's standpoint is relatively low-cost and can provide helpful context to audiences. This practice contributes to norms of disclosure that shift audiences' expectations to believe that speakers will reveal details about their personal histories.

In this essay, I argue against the standpoint expectation as a speech norm. The expectation is epistemically counterproductive in most cases. When a person reveals their standpoint to boost their credibility, they can obscure other relevant information and may prompt listeners to think that a person with a particular standpoint speaks for their group or that people with shared experiences think in the same way. When people discount someone's credibility because of their standpoint, they discount potentially valuable information and cause people whose credibility is blocked to retaliate by denying others' credibility. The expectation also makes it harder to refuse this dynamic by concealing one's standpoint, to the extent that those who remain reticent are silenced, excluded from the community of listeners, or denied the ability to effectively convey their message.

In Section I, I introduce standpoint epistemology and the standpoint expectation. I then argue that proponents of standpoint epistemology should take a pause in promoting the standpoint expectation because the expectation may not deliver the epistemic benefits that are associated with considering different standpoints. In Section II, I argue that the information about a person's standpoint is often misleading to the extent that their standpoint provides a credibility boost. I discuss the conditions under which a standpoint does boost a speaker's credibility. In Section III, I argue information about standpoints is also misleading when people cite it as a credibility blocker, discussing whether and when *ad hominem* is a fallacy. I consider a potential solution—people could generally refuse to meet the standpoint expectation—and the reasons that solution fails: that people who fail to meet the expectation can also experience a loss of credibility, and opting out of the expectation can itself be a misleading signal. In Section IV, I discuss a few other problems with appealing to people's standpoints as credibility boosts or blocks. Finally, in Section V, I conclude that, whatever its epistemic merits, the standpoint expectation is not epistemically reliable enough to justify the costs.

I. STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY AND EXPECTATIONS

The standpoint expectation refers to the social expectation to make personal histories and social identities available when making arguments. When someone makes information about their standpoint available, this information bolsters or blocks the credibility of the arguments they are making. When people disclose biographical details of a speaker's life as a way of bolstering the speaker's credibility to discuss a more general topic, they are meeting the standpoint expectation.

The standpoint expectation is also satisfied when people disclose biographical details from a speaker's life as a way of blocking the speaker from advancing an argument on a more general topic. In this section, I will describe the justification for this expectation—otherwise known as standpoint epistemology. I will then argue that the epistemic benefits of considering people's standpoints are often overstated and that the epistemic risks to invoking the expectation are likely to outweigh the costs.

Standpoint epistemologists argue that people's epistemic credentials partly depend on social facts about them.¹ These social facts can include facts about a person's personal history, social identity, and experiences of privilege or oppression. Briana Toole presents the core thesis of standpoint epistemology as the claim that

[c]ertain nonepistemic facts related to one's social identity may make a difference to what evidence one has, whether one recognizes evidence as such, what claims one entertains, and so on. One's social identity may "open one up" to evidence in ways that aren't modeled by traditional epistemologies. It is this sense in which one's social identity, a nonepistemic feature, makes a difference to what one is in a position to know.²

Toole then clarifies that "epistemic" features of people include things like their access to evidence, whether they are justified in their beliefs, and whether they are generally reliable at perceiving the truth and forming accurate beliefs. Non-epistemic features are those which make a difference to whether a person knows that a claim is true but which are not straightforwardly conducive to truth-seeking.

Standpoint epistemologists do not, generally, claim that a person's social role or personal history *automatically* puts them at a social advantage. Rather, standpoint epistemologists argue that people's standpoints generally provide an epistemic advantage to those who are less powerful. On this view, a person's social position is presumptively inversely related to their credibility—people with more dominant social positions are at an epistemic disadvantage. Furthermore, not everyone who is socially oppressed has an epistemic advantage. For a person's oppressed standpoint to bolster their epistemic credibility, they must understand their status as a member of a socially oppressed group and understand the way that it has shaped what they know and how they know it.³

1. This definition draws on Briana Toole's characterization of the field. Briana Toole, *From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression*, 34 *HYPATIA* 598, 599 (2019).

2. *Id.* at 600.

3. Sally Haslanger, *Political Epistemology and Social Critique*, 7 *OXFORD STUD. POL. PHIL.* 24–25 (2021) ("[S]imply including diverse knowers as sources of situated knowledge, taken at face value, is also insufficient. A *critical* standpoint is necessary. One way of achieving a critical standpoint is through consciousness raising [C]onsciousness raising produces a warranted critical standpoint and a *pro tanto* claim against others through a process of inquiry.").

Standpoint epistemology is, therefore, much narrower than the broad claim that people with different backgrounds know different things because they have access to different evidence. Standpoint epistemologists are focused specifically on how a person's background fits into a broader social hierarchy. In this way, they are building on Marx's observation that the knowledge of the alienation associated with labor could only be found "from the standpoint of the worker."⁴ Following in this tradition, standpoint theorists today argue that members of socially subordinated groups are better placed to understand political questions than members of socially dominant or privileged groups.⁵

This perspective sets standpoint epistemology apart from the more general claim that each person is generally an expert about her own experiences and that each person has distinctive knowledge of the world that other people lack.⁶ Rather, standpoint epistemologists argue that there is a distinctive kind of epistemic advantage that people can only gain through the experience of oppression.⁷ For example, Ashwini Vasanthakumar argues that victims of oppression have epistemic advantages over other people because they have a heightened awareness of injustice, in addition to the fact that they know what it feels like to be oppressed.⁸ Uma Narayan writes that "it is *easier* and *more likely* for the oppressed to have critical insights into the conditions of their own oppression."⁹

I do not dispute standpoint epistemologists' claim that non-epistemic features of a person's identity, including their social status, can give them insight into questions about broader phenomena, especially when it comes to questions where social status matters a lot such as medicine, ethics, or social policy. For example, feminist standpoint epistemologists sometimes argue that economic debates have historically overlooked the value of women's reproductive labor and unpaid caregiving labor.¹⁰ Social scientists and policymakers may have committed this oversight because male policymakers and academics historically excluded women from participating in economic debates. I also agree that welcoming people with different experiences into an epistemic community can enrich the community's

4. Karl Marx & Fredrick Engels, *THE ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS OF 1844 AND THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO* 33 (Martin Milligan trans., 1988).

5. See Elizabeth Anderson, *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, *THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY* (2020).

6. For a discussion of these two views and how they relate, see Raimund Pils & Philipp Schoenegger, *On the Epistemological Similarities of Market Liberalism and Standpoint Theory*, *EPISTEME* 1, 1–21 (2021).

7. See, e.g., Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality and Epistemic Injustice*, in *THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE* 115, 115–24 (Ian James Kidd et al. eds., 2017); José Medina, *THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RESISTANCE: GENDER AND RACIAL OPPRESSION, EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, AND RESISTANT IMAGINATIONS* (2012).

8. Ashwini Vasanthakumar, *Epistemic Privilege and Victims' Duties to Resist Their Oppression*, 35 *J. APPLIED PHIL.* 465 (2018).

9. Uma Narayan, *The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives From a Nonwestern Feminist*, in *GENDER/BODY/KNOWLEDGE: FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTIONS OF BEING AND KNOWING* 213, 220 (Alison M. Jaggar & Susan Bordo eds., 1989).

10. Anderson, *supra* note 5.

understanding of concepts that are relevant to social questions. People only understood sexual harassment as a distinctive category of wrongdoing once women were included in conversations about just working conditions.¹¹

My target in this essay is not standpoint epistemology *per se*, but a set of social norms and expectations that seem to arise to promote the benefits of standpoint epistemology. For the sake of argument, I grant that people's experiences of oppression can be an important source of knowledge and that including people from oppressed standpoints in more general conversations about social issues can often have epistemic benefits.¹² But it does not follow from these claims that people should be granted heightened credibility *on balance* by virtue of their experience of oppression. Nor does it follow that people should be expected to identify their particular standpoint or experience of oppression as a means of establishing epistemic credentials.

The standpoint expectation is the expectation that speakers acknowledge their standpoint of oppression or privilege and that listeners will consider the speakers' standpoint in evaluating what the speaker says. The argument for the standpoint expectation goes like this:

- P1: A speaker's epistemic credentials partly depend on social facts about them.
- P2: Speakers should make their epistemic credentials available to listeners.
- C1: Speakers should tell listeners social facts about themselves.
- P3: Listeners should consider a speaker's epistemic credentials when they evaluate what the speaker says.
- C2: Listeners should consider social facts about a speaker when they evaluate what the speaker says.

Notice that standpoint epistemology does not straightforwardly entail that the standpoint expectation is a good practice. It could be the case that someone's epistemic credentials partly depend on social facts about them, and the case that revealing those social facts could be epistemically counterproductive. I will argue for this claim in the next few sections.

11. MIRANDA FRICKER, *EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE: POWER AND THE ETHICS OF KNOWING* 149–52 (2007).

12. More cognitively diverse groups are often better at solving problems. See H el ene Landemore, *Deliberation, Cognitive Diversity, and Democratic Inclusiveness: An Epistemic Argument for the Random Selection of Representatives*, 190 *SYNTHESE*, 1209 (2013); Alison Reynolds & David Lewis, *Teams Solve Problems Faster When They're More Cognitively Diverse*, *HARV. BUS. REV.* (Mar. 30, 2017), <https://hbr.org/2017/03/teams-solve-problems-faster-when-theyre-more-cognitively-diverse> [<https://perma.cc/G8XX-AY8G>]. Perhaps one way to ensure that a group is cognitively diverse may be to encourage people to share their personal histories. People are also more persuasive in convincing people to change their minds on questions of public policy when they frame their arguments in terms of their own personal history. See David Broockman & Joshua Kalla, *Durably Reducing Transphobia: A Field Experiment on Door-to-Door Canvassing*, 352 *SCIENCE* 220 (2016); Joshua L. Kalla & David E. Broockman, *Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments*, 114 *AM. POL. SCI. REV.* 410 (2020). This may suggest that many people think that personal narratives provide evidence that is relevant to their political views.

Another problem with the standpoint expectation arises when it is deployed to give some speakers heightened credibility and to undermine the credibility of other speakers.

- P4: People who speak from a position of oppression have more credibility, all else equal, than people who speak from a position of privilege.
- C3: Listeners should, all else equal, consider oppressed speakers to be more credible than privileged speakers.

I am reluctant to grant that the experience of oppression is even a *pro tanto* epistemic credential. As most standpoint theorists acknowledge, “both social positions come with epistemic plusses and minuses.”¹³ But for the insights of standpoint epistemology to justify the standpoint expectation, it would need to be the case that oppressed people were generally more credible on questions related to their oppression, all else equal, than privileged people. Yet the claim that oppressed people are more credible is also an empirical claim which there is some reason to doubt. One reason to doubt this is that, according to standpoint theorists, not all oppressed people have an epistemic advantage; the advantage is only held by people with raised consciousnesses who are aware of their oppression.¹⁴

But even if we grant that an oppressed standpoint is an epistemic credential, it does not follow that a listener should treat people’s standpoints as credibility boosts. Nor does it follow, as some suggest, that listeners should block or discount the credibility of speakers who are privileged. When listeners expect information about a speaker’s standpoint to serve as a proxy for the speakers’ credibility, they prompt speakers to misrepresent their standpoints and undermine the epistemic reliability of the expectation. Also, listeners risk over-emphasizing information about a person’s standpoint rather than keeping in mind that a standpoint is only a *pro tanto* credibility boost or block (to the extent that it is) and not the kind of factor that determines a person’s credibility *on balance*.

II. THE RISKS OF CREDIBILITY BOOSTING

By credibility boosting, I am referring to the practice of increasing an assessment of a person’s credibility because of their standpoint. In addition to the aforementioned examples, consider Jose Medina’s claim that oppressed people generally have an epistemic advantage over privileged people because they have, by virtue of their oppressed status, likely developed epistemic virtues like humility and open-mindedness.¹⁵

13. Katherine Dormandy, *Disagreement from the Religious Margins*, 95 RES PHILOSOPHICA 371 (2018).

14. Toole, *supra* note 1, at 600.

15. MEDINA, *supra* note 7, at 43–48.

As Liam Kofi Bright points out, it is unclear what exactly credibility boosting consists of.¹⁶ On the one hand, it could be a principle that applies as a general matter, as standpoint theorists sometimes suggest. A listener, for example, could adopt a policy of viewing people from oppressed groups as epistemically superior, as a general matter, even if they acknowledge that not all oppressed people will be epistemically superior.¹⁷ It could also apply in particular cases. For example, if a listener finds out that a speaker is a member of an oppressed group and then takes that speaker to be more credible on a particular topic.

Credibility boosting is epistemically risky whether it applies in the general or particular sense. If the practice applies in the general sense, the practice seems to rely on a false premise that people who are members of oppressed groups have a general kind of expertise. If the practice applies only to particular people in particular cases, then it could be the case that some speakers, by virtue of their standpoints, are epistemically superior *in a sense*, but other people may be epistemically superior in other senses. Also, adopting a practice of credibility boosting, even just in particular cases, can prompt speakers to misrepresent their standpoints, and it can prompt listeners to misinterpret the evidence.

Consider first the claim that a person's standpoint makes them a more reliable epistemic agent. There are epistemic reasons to consider people's standpoints and to respond favorably to people who speak from an oppressed standpoint. If a person's voice is overlooked because of their low social status, then an epistemically responsible listener may have reason to engage in general credibility boosting as a corrective to their tendency to overlook oppressed speakers' perspectives. However, that claim is distinct from the claim that people who speak from an oppressed standpoint are generally more reliable.

Whether oppression functions as a general epistemic qualification is partly an empirical question. As far as I can tell, there is no generalizable evidence that oppression per se makes people better epistemic agents. Even when it is true that people who have experienced oppression and engaged in consciousness-raising to understand their experiences have a better understanding of what it is like to experience oppression, this knowledge does not necessarily give them the best insight into what to do about it. In some cases, it may undermine their credibility. For example, judges often dismiss victims of violence from juries on the grounds that their experiences make them less credible at evaluating the evidence in an assault or murder trial.

Empirical evidence also casts doubt on the standpoint expectation. Psychologists find that when people's identities are salient to them or to listeners, this changes the way that they reason and can make them more vulnerable to making cognitive mistakes, especially when they think their identity is being

16. Liam Kofi Bright, *On The Unity of Science, or – All Philosophy Is Political!*, THE SOOTY EMPIRIC (Aug. 24, 2019), <http://sootyempiric.blogspot.com/2019/08/on-unity-of-science-or-all-philosophy.html> [https://perma.cc/ST4S-RWQ9].

17. See MEDINA, *supra* note 7, at 42–46.

threatened in some way.¹⁸ This is true for speakers, too.¹⁹ Identity-based framing effects generally lead people astray. People are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning or to overlook important information when evidence is framed in terms of identity categories that are salient to them.²⁰ Additionally, to the extent that people believe inaccurate stereotypes about some groups, these stereotypes can erroneously affect listeners' assessments of a speaker's credibility.²¹ For this reason, it is unclear the standpoint expectation will enable listeners to be more reliable epistemic agents, even if members of oppressed groups do have epistemic advantages.

The main problem with the general practice of credibility boosting is that even if members of oppressed groups have knowledge that members of privileged groups lack, it is not clear that this knowledge is the kind of knowledge that would give them an advantage in knowing how to solve large-scale social problems.²² It could, in some cases, make them less reliable.²³ As Olúfẹmi Táíwò writes, "oppression is not a prep school," meaning that we should not expect that a person's experience of trauma or suffering oppression makes them more reliable at understanding what to do about it.²⁴

Another risk to this approach is that the kinds of people whose voices are included to include a diverse range of standpoints in academic or elite discourse may not represent the people they are taken to speak for. Táíwò writes, "[d]eferential ways of dealing with identity can inherit the distortions caused by [elite]

18. See Peter Nauroth et al., *Social Identity Threat Motivates Science-Discrediting Online Comments*, 10 PLOS ONE 22 (2015). Though on the other hand, the magnitude of framing effects is likely small or limited. See Eran Amsalem & Alon Zoizner, *Real, but Limited: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of Framing Effects in the Political Domain*, 52 BRIT. J. POL. SCI. 221 (2022).

19. For example, the literature on stereotype threat indicates that identity-based priming can affect people's reasoning. This literature is controversial though. One meta-analysis finds small effects, but further replication of these findings is needed. Ulrich Schimmack, *Hidden Figures: Replication Failures in the Stereotype Threat Literature*, REPLICABILITY-INDEX (Apr. 7, 2017), <https://replicationindex.com/2017/04/07/hidden-figures-replication-failures-in-the-stereotype-threat-literature/> [<https://perma.cc/5Y35-3TQX>]; Markus Appel & Silvana Weber, *Do Mass Mediated Stereotypes Harm Members of Negatively Stereotyped Groups? A Meta-Analytical Review on Media-Generated Stereotype Threat and Stereotype Lift*, 48 COMM'N RSCH. 151 (2021); Oren R. Shewach, Paul R. Sackett & Sander Quint, *Stereotype Threat Effects in Settings with Features Likely Versus Unlikely in Operational Test Settings: A Meta-Analysis*, 104 J. APPLIED PSYCH. 1514 (2019).

20. The best evidence for this is in the political sphere. See, e.g., Jay J. Van Bavel & Andrea Pereira, *The Partisan Brain: An Identity-Based Model of Political Belief*, 22 TRENDS COGNITIVE SCIS. 213 (2018); Eli J. Finkel et al., *Political Sectarianism in America*, 370 SCIENCE 533 (2020).

21. Only some stereotypes are inaccurate, however. For an overview of when stereotypes are accurate or inaccurate, see Lee Jussim, Jarret T. Crawford & Rachel S. Rubinstein, *Stereotype (In)Accuracy in Perceptions of Groups and Individuals*, 24 CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCH. SCI. 490 (2015).

22. Spencer Case, *White Privilege: A Conservative Perspective*, in ETHICS, LEFT AND RIGHT: THE ISSUES THAT DIVIDE US 465 (Robert Fischer ed., 2019).

23. For example, this is why people who had negative experiences with the criminal justice system or people who were victims of crime can be excluded from jury selection, on the grounds that these potential jurors are more likely to be biased in judging a case.

24. Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò, *Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference*, 108 PHILOSOPHER (2020).

selection processes.”²⁵ Of course, including members of historically disadvantaged groups in elite conversations may nevertheless improve on the epistemic credentials of a less diverse community of elite speakers. But by virtue of being elite spaces, they are still excluding people who do not have access to elite spaces due to their experiences of oppression or other disadvantages.

For these reasons, coming from a particular standpoint does not boost a speaker’s general credibility. On the other hand, a person’s standpoint may boost their credibility in particular cases. Consider some hypothetical headlines that illustrate this point.

- Credentials: “I’m an experienced economist. Here’s why raising the minimum wage will cause unemployment.”
- Lived experience: “I’m a retail worker. This is what it’s like to make minimum wage.”

The retail worker’s experience as a low-wage worker gives her an advantage in knowing what it is like to work for minimum wage. The economist’s experience studying the relationship between wages and employment boosts his credibility on the policy question.

Of course, credentialism and lived experience can be misleading in some cases. Professional experts can be less reliable at understanding the subject of their expertise than an exceptional unprofessional.²⁶ Expert communities are prone to make systematic errors too, especially when there are professional incentives for them to support a particular perspective.²⁷ And in this case, other experienced economists disagree about whether raising the minimum wage will cause unemployment, so it would be a mistake to assume that a single economist represents the field.

Likewise, biographical information can be misleading. After all, any single retail worker probably does not know what most typical retail workers experience. For this reason, some critics of standpoint epistemology point out that this approach can give people the false impression that everyone who shares some aspect of their personal history will have similar experiences of that history or that

25. *Id.*

26. For example, a Supreme Court prediction hobbyist outperforms both political scientists’ algorithmic predictions of Supreme Court decisions as well as legal experts’ and journalists’ predictions. One expert explains the hobbyist’s success by noting that “[i]t’s possible that too much thinking or knowledge about the law could hurt you. If you make your career writing law review articles, like we do, you come up with your own normative baggage and your own preconceptions. . . . We can’t be as dispassionate as this guy.” Oliver Roeder, *Why The Best Supreme Court Predictor in The World Is Some Random Guy in Queens*, FIVETHIRTYEIGHT (Nov. 17, 2014, 12:04 PM), <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-the-best-supreme-court-predictor-in-the-world-is-some-random-guy-in-queens/> [https://perma.cc/RD4E-322L].

27. Consider, for example, the problems associated with using peer review in scientific communities. See Remco Heesen & Liam Kofi Bright, *Is Peer Review a Good Idea?*, 72 BRIT. J. FOR PHIL. SCI. 635 (2021).

they will think alike.²⁸ When a speaker presents their particular standpoint as boosting their credibility on a particular topic, listeners can misinterpret the way that a speaker's standpoint boosts their credibility by assuming that everyone with that standpoint would agree with the speaker. And even if this practice promotes broadly accurate beliefs about groups, encouraging the use of cultural stereotypes can be counterproductive to opposing oppression, even if they are accurate.²⁹

Still, these kinds of credibility boosts are usually warranted as a heuristic. All else equal, economists will know more about the economy than non-experts, and people who have experienced retail work know what it's like to work in retail more than people who have not. In contrast, a person's standpoint does not make them a general subject matter expert. Consider this headline:

■ Misalignment: "I'm a retail worker. Here's why raising the minimum wage will not cause unemployment."

The hypothetical author of this story is suggesting that working a minimum wage job boosts their credibility as an expert on economic policy.³⁰ They are presenting their standpoint as if it is a credential, but the credential their standpoint provides is misaligned with the topic they are discussing. The standpoint expectation prompts this kind of misalignment. When people are encouraged to frame their arguments in terms of their standpoints, particularly their experiences as members of an oppressed group, it can be misleading in cases where those standpoints are not relevant to the point they are making.

28. Narayan, *supra* note 9.

29. See Erin Beeghly, *What's Wrong with Stereotypes? The Falsity Hypothesis*, 47 SOC. THEORY & PRAC. 33 (2021).

30. This kind of misalignment is not merely a hypothetical possibility. The news site Vox.com regularly publishes articles with headlines and sub-headlines such as "I was born into the 1%. It's time to change the system." or "I live in small-town Middle America. The idea that moving here will fix our nation is wrong." or "I'm a librarian. The last thing we need is Silicon Valley 'disruption.'" Adam Roberts, *Is Wealth Immoral?*, VOX (Aug. 8, 2019, 7:00 AM), <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/8/20699752/rich-wealth-millionaire-1-percent-billionaire> [<https://perma.cc/J6DP-YC8H>]; Lyz Lenz, *Move Back to Your Dying Hometown. Unless You Can't.*, VOX (Apr. 8, 2019, 7:30 AM), <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/4/8/18297172/midwest-hometown-small-town-middle-america> [<https://perma.cc/AR6L-GQMW>]; Amanda Oliver, *I'm a Librarian. The Last Thing We Need Is Silicon Valley 'Disruption.'*, VOX (Jul. 26, 2018, 10:20 AM), <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/7/26/17616516/amazon-silicon-valley-libraries-forbes> [perma.cc/CH7T-TJKL]. Or, in *The New York Times*, people write "I'm an Asian-American Harvard alumnus. Affirmative action works." or "I'm a Black police officer. Here's how to change the system." Robert Rhew, *I'm an Asian-American Harvard Alumnus. Affirmative Action Works.*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 16, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/opinion/harvard-affirmative-action-lawsuit-asian.html> [<https://perma.cc/5EZW-2FKT>]; David Hughes, *I'm a Black Police Officer. Here's How to Change the System.*, N.Y. TIMES (Jul. 16, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/opinion/police-funding-defund.html> [<https://perma.cc/S3SX-DWY3>]. I could go on. One problem with these headlines or this style of argument is the implicit claim that a person's personal history bolsters their credibility about wealth taxes, urban renewal, information technology, affirmative action, or criminal justice reform. Likewise, it would be a mistake to dismiss these arguments by citing the authors' personal histories.

The practice of credibility boosting, even in the particular case, is also epistemically unreliable. Listeners cannot be sure whether a speaker has in fact engaged in the practice of consciousness-raising, which is part of the epistemic advantage they have as members of oppressed groups. For example, imagine a woman who says,

I have had a hard time finding a trustworthy and reliable babysitter, and I do not want to send my child to an institutional daycare. I want my child to have one-on-one care. Ideally, I would stay home with my children. But long-term, that is not an affordable path. I wish that instead of talking about subsidies for daycares, politicians talked more about making it affordable for women to stay home with their kids.

Should this perspective be included as evidence of a woman's lived experiences? On the one hand, a listener may suspect that the speaker's preference to parent her young children is an adaptive preference that is formed under conditions of oppression. Women are socialized to feel responsible for caregiving. In some communities, people judge mothers who work outside the home and praise mothers who stay home to raise their own children. If the speaker is a member of a community like this, then a standpoint theorist might argue that being a woman, in this case, is not an epistemic credential because the speaker has not engaged in consciousness-raising. But it could also be the case that the speaker's criticism of childcare subsidies is authentic, and she is not speaking from false consciousness. The problem is that from the listener's perspective, it is impossible to tell whether a woman's reported childcare preferences are authentic in a way that boosts what she is able to know.

Even if it is true that a speaker's standpoint is relevant to their epistemic credibility and it does not have the costs, it does not follow that a listener should take an interest in people's standpoints for the sake of their epistemic benefits. Because people can boost their perceived credibility when they meet the standpoint expectation, the expectation can also encourage misrepresentation or exaggeration. Consider the Notorious B.I.G.'s description of his childhood: "We used to fuss when the landlord dissed us/No heat, wonder why Christmas missed us/Birthdays was the worst days/Now we sip Champagne when we thirsty." After his death, Biggie's mother Voletta corrected the record, telling a reporter that "Christmas never missed my son. . . . As far as the line about the landlord insulting us, I never owed. Up to this day, my credit is the best in the world. He's telling a story."³¹

The standpoint expectation is, therefore, epistemically risky when it leads to credibility boosting for several reasons. First, it is easy for listeners to over-interpret a speaker's invocation of their oppressed standpoint as establishing *general*

31. Raekha Prasad, *My Boy Biggie*, GUARDIAN (Dec. 7, 1999, 9:37 PM), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/dec/07/gender.uk1> [<https://perma.cc/NS4X-35Q7>].

subject matter expertise rather than expertise about a particular phenomenon or experience. Second, even when a speaker invokes their standpoint to establish credibility in the particular case, it is easy for listeners to over-generalize and assume the speaker represents everyone with that standpoint. Tying credibility to the adoption of an oppressed standpoint can also incentivize exaggeration or misrepresentation, further misleading listeners. Finally, the standpoint expectation can prevent listeners from learning from people with different standpoints.

III. THE RISKS OF CREDIBILITY BLOCKING

Credibility blocking is the flip side of credibility boosting. As Charles Mills writes,

The idea of group-based cognitive handicap is not an alien one to the radical tradition. . . . Indeed, it is, on the contrary, a straightforward corollary of standpoint theory: if one group is privileged, after all, it must be by comparison with another group that is handicapped.³²

Other standpoint theorists affirm Mills's assertion that just some oppressed people are epistemically privileged; privileged people are often epistemically handicapped.³³ David Kinney and Liam Kofi Bright argue that "some agents who are members of elite groups engage in motivated ignorance of their own privilege . . . [and] this motivated ignorance is rationally so maintained."³⁴ However, Laura Beeby argues that privileged people's epistemic disadvantages may not be so motivated; rather, their "inadequate epistemic resources" can put them at a genuine moral disadvantage.³⁵ Whether privileged people's ignorance is rational or harmful to them, a proponent of the standpoint expectation would respond to the claim that privileged people are lacking credibility on questions of injustice as a justification for listeners blocking or discounting the credibility of privileged speakers.

Yet, the practice of linking a speaker's particular standpoints to assessments of the speaker's credibility can lead listeners astray. When listeners focus on a privileged speaker's standpoint and discount their credibility on those grounds, they overlook important information that the speaker is credibly providing. The standpoint expectation creates several counterproductive incentives for how speakers present themselves.

32. Charles W. Mills, *White Ignorance*, in RACE AND EPISTEMOLOGIES OF IGNORANCE 13, 26–31 (Shannon Sullivan & Nancy Tuana eds., 2007).

33. See, e.g., MEDINA, *supra* note 7, at 89; Toole, *supra* note 1, at 91. Toole writes, "marginally situated knowers and dominantly situated knowers are not epistemic peers . . . marginalized knowers are epistemically privileged in the social domain." *Id.*

34. David Kinney & Liam Kofi Bright, *Risk Aversion and Elite-Group Ignorance*, PHIL. & PHENOMENOLOGICAL RSCH. (2021).

35. Laura Beeby, *A Critique of Hermeneutical Injustice*, 111 PROCEEDINGS ARISTOTELIAN SOC'Y 479, 484 (2011).

First, the standpoint expectation can lead listeners astray by prompting listeners to focus more on personal details of a person's story and less on the factual claims or the substance of the speaker's arguments.³⁶ For example, return to the example of the person who writes, "I'm an *experienced economist*. Here's why raising the minimum wage will cause unemployment." Proponents of the standpoint expectation may reply to this argument along the lines of "The author of this headline is a rich, privileged, white man. Why should we believe him about how best to help working people?" In this case, considering the economist's standpoint would block his credibility on the question without providing additional evidence about why he was wrong.

Members of oppressed groups can also be harmed by this practice of credibility blocking. For example, consider John McWhorter's recent discussion of his book *Woke Racism*. McWhorter writes:

Many will see me as traitorous in writing this as a black person. They will not understand that I see myself as serving my race by writing it. One of the grimmest tragedies of how this perversion of sociopolitics makes us think (or, not think) is that it will bar more than a few black readers from understanding that I am calling for them to be treated with true dignity. However, they and everyone else should also realize: I know quite well that white readers will be more likely to hear out views like this when written by a black person, and consider it nothing less than my duty as a black person to write it. A white version of this would be blithely dismissed as racist. I will be dismissed instead as self-hating by a certain crowd.³⁷

On the one hand, McWhorter has acknowledged that some readers will read his argument as more credible because he is Black. On the other hand, he anticipates that commentators will also treat his work as an adaptive response to his experience of oppression as a Black man.³⁸ In this case, the practice of considering an oppressed standpoint to a speaker's credibility backfired. McWhorter's standpoint was interpreted as a credibility block.

Second, the standpoint expectation can also lead listeners astray by creating incentives for speakers to misrepresent or obscure their backgrounds. While the practice of credibility boosting incentivized people to heighten the salience of their own oppression, the practice of credibility blocking incentivizes people to downplay their privilege as a means of self-protection. To the extent that this happens, these dynamics undermine the epistemic justification for standpoint expectation.

36. Rebecca J. Krause & Derek D. Rucker, *Strategic Storytelling: When Narratives Help Versus Hurt the Persuasive Power of Facts*, 46 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 216 (2020).

37. John McWhorter, *The Neoracists*, PERSUASION (Feb. 8, 2021), <https://www.persuasion.community/p/john-mcwhorter-the-neoracists?s=r> [<https://perma.cc/C94U-W4AR>].

38. This highlights the tension between the theory of adaptive preferences and standpoint epistemology. For more on this, see Rosa Terlazzo, *Conceptualizing Adaptive Preferences Respectfully: An Indirectly Substantive Account*, 24 J. POL. PHIL. 206 (2016).

Third, credibility boosting and blocking prevent people from building on shared experiences and connecting with people from different backgrounds.³⁹ Even if someone with an oppressed standpoint has an epistemic advantage, that does not mean they cannot learn from other standpoints. “The same tactics of deference that insulate us from criticism also insulate us from connection and transformation. They prevent us from engaging empathetically and authentically with the struggles of other people.”⁴⁰ Therefore, even when someone’s standpoint merits a credibility boost, invoking it can be epistemically counterproductive if it blocks empathetic engagement with other perspectives.

This is not to say that a speaker’s privileged standpoint should never be cited as a credibility blocker. In some cases, a person’s background is relevant to evaluating their argument because the speaker is advocating for something that they do not apply to themselves. In these instances, charges of hypocrisy are warranted to the extent that a speaker is applying standards of blameworthiness to others that they do not apply to themselves. What seems like an *ad hominem* attack is also warranted when invoking a person’s standpoint or background highlights an inconsistency in the person’s position.

Consider the contrast between Dylan Matthews’s criticism of Effective Altruism on the grounds that many rich, white, male tech workers participate in it⁴¹ and Frances Kamm’s criticism of utilitarianism on the grounds that none of its proponents act as if it is true.⁴² Matthews’s criticism of Effective Altruism was a form of *ad hominem*, dismissing people’s arguments on the basis of their personal experiences and social position. But Kamm’s invocation of people’s personal experiences is not *ad hominem* because Kamm was highlighting a seeming contradiction in the utilitarian’s position.⁴³

Again, it is worth distinguishing between standpoint epistemology and the standpoint expectation. The foregoing argument has two parts. First, it is not always true that oppressed speakers are, all else equal, epistemically advantaged or more credible than privileged speakers, even if this claim is limited to evaluating evidence in the social domain. A person’s standpoint can obscure their ability to know some things, even if it makes them distinctively sensitive to other kinds of evidence. Second, even when it is true that oppressed speakers are epistemically advantaged, the standpoint expectation can still be misleading for listeners because listeners with information about a speaker’s standpoint may be more likely to misinterpret what the speaker is saying.

39. Jenny Zhang, *Identity Fraud*, GAWKER (Oct. 7, 2021), <https://www.gawker.com/culture/identity-fraud> [<https://perma.cc/9LMF-9KYN>].

40. Táíwò, *supra* note 24.

41. Dylan Matthews, *I Spent a Weekend at Google Talking with Nerds About Charity. I Came Away . . . Worried.*, VOX (Aug. 10, 2015), <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9124145/effective-altruism-global-ai> [<https://perma.cc/MG5S-F9CR>].

42. Alex Voorhoeve & Frances Kamm, *In Search of the Deep Structure of Morality: An Interview with Frances Kamm*, 9 IMPRINTS 93 (2006).

43. Douglas N. Walton, *The Ad Hominem Argument As an Informal Fallacy*, 1 ARGUMENTATION 317 (1987).

IV. NORMS FOR BELIEVERS

In response to the foregoing arguments, one might argue that listeners should consider the social facts about a speaker because listeners should consider all the relevant information, and the speaker's background and identity can be just as relevant to understanding what they are saying as the content of the speaker's message. One may also reply that listeners can form beliefs however they want to and that the standpoint expectation is no worse than the many other ways people can make up their minds.

Consider first the response that overlooking the social facts about a speaker amounts to discounting relevant evidence. Miranda Fricker defends standpoint epistemology partly on the grounds that skepticism about testimonial evidence is unwarranted. After all, most of the things we believe we believe primarily because of testimonial evidence. This response assumes that listeners learning information about a speaker provides someone with evidence or that it will enable them to interpret the evidence reliably. I mostly dispute this claim in Sections II and III. More information does not always translate to better belief formation. One may reply to these arguments by citing evidence that listeners gain a distinctive perspective on questions when they hear a detailed narrative that is related to those questions, which cannot be captured when speakers convey information without any narrative or vividly detailed content.⁴⁴ Even so, this claim would not establish that the narrative information surrounding a person's claim is itself a form of evidence, or that it is a substitute for evidence, or that it makes beliefs more reliable. Though some listeners may benefit from learning about the experiential dimensions of a phenomenon, additional information can often be misleading. And even irrelevant information can shape people's beliefs.

Moreover, as Rachel Fraser suggests, the demands of standpoint epistemology go beyond merely believing a person's specific testimony about particular experiences.⁴⁵ Listeners who accept the broad principles of standpoint epistemology are prompted to accept the broader narratives that people from oppressed standpoints present and to be skeptical of the narrative testimony of advantaged people. And as Rachel Fraser writes,

It may be true that testimony per se is an indispensable epistemic resource. It is far less plausible that narrative testimony—and its attendant, deep forms of epistemic dependence—are ineradicable features of our epistemic lives.⁴⁶

Fraser points out that even if it is true that people should accept simple forms of testimony if they do not have good reasons to believe otherwise, testimony that takes a narrative form is often less trustworthy. This is because accepting

44. See Sara Aronowitz & Tania Lombrozo, *Experiential Explanation*, 12 TOPICS COGNITIVE SCI. 1321–36 (2020).

45. See Rachel Fraser, *Narrative Testimony*, 178 PHIL. STUD. 4025 (2021).

46. *Id.* at 4050.

narrative testimony involves not only accepting a particular claim, but accepting a bundle of claims that are arranged in a specific way, and the structure of a narrative can affect how the listener hears that content.

On the other hand, one could defend the practices of credibility boosting and blocking on the grounds that there are many permissible ways to form beliefs.⁴⁷ On this view, an epistemic permissivist may argue that credibility boosting and blocking on the basis of a speaker's standpoint is not particularly objectionable from an epistemic perspective because there are multiple permissible ways to respond to a body of evidence. A listener could respond to information about a person's standpoint by giving the speaker a credibility boost or not. Miriam Schoenfield defends permissivism on the grounds that there is usually more than one rational attitude to take towards a claim given some body of evidence.⁴⁸ Equally qualified people can disagree about how to interpret the same information.⁴⁹

This is a potential defense of credibility boosting and blocking, but it does not justify the specific practice of adopting the standpoint expectation, as opposed to other approaches, for two reasons. First, epistemic permissivism sits uneasily with standpoint epistemologists' claim that oppressed speakers who have engaged in consciousness-raising have an epistemic advantage when it comes to interpreting evidence. The two views do not necessarily conflict because a proponent of standpoint epistemology may argue that oppressed speakers are not epistemic peers to privileged speakers or that they have access to evidence that privileged speakers lack.⁵⁰ These views sit uneasily with each other. The standpoint epistemologist adopts a more constrained view of how people should form their beliefs. That is, if a listener follows the standpoint expectation, then they should give a credibility boost to oppressed speakers, viewing them as superior epistemic agents. But if permissivism is true, then *listeners* may, without error, interpret the speech of an oppressed person as more credible than other speech or not. While epistemic permissivism does not undermine standpoint epistemologists' claim that some oppressed people have an epistemic advantage, it undermines the claim that listeners should presumptively treat these experiences as advantages.

Second, with this approach, it may be just as warranted, epistemically speaking, for speakers to engage in credibility boosting for privileged people and blocking for the less privileged. As standpoint epistemologists note, people who are raised in oppressive societies may be especially likely to boost privileged points of view and to block oppressed people's credibility.⁵¹ It may seem that

47. For a related discussion, see Natalie Ashton, *Relativising Epistemic Advantage*, in *THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELATIVISM* 329 (Martin Kusch ed., 2019).

48. Miriam Schoenfield, *Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism is True and What it Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief*, 48 *NOÛS* 193, 193–94 (2014).

49. Gideon Rosen, *Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism*, 15 *PHIL. PERSPS.* 69 (2001).

50. Briana Toole, *Knowledge and Social Identity* (Aug. 2018) (Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas at Austin).

51. For a discussion of this kind of silencing or quieting, see Collins, *supra* note 7.

people should not respond to information in ways that so clearly reflect these historically contingent prejudices. The fact that someone was raised in a racist or sexist culture, for example, cannot justify the practice of credibility boosting for white people or men. Credibility boosting here would not be epistemically justified if it is based on the irrelevant influence of the listener's upbringing amid injustice. Yet if permissivism is true, then the seemingly irrelevant influence of a person's upbringing does not discredit the way they respond to evidence. The permissivist therefore cannot claim that it is an epistemic mistake to give a credibility boost to privileged people rather than oppressed people, at least not on these grounds.

In response to this argument, one may reply that there are moral reasons to avoid epistemic practices that amount to credibility boosting for privileged people and credibility blocking for the oppressed. Rima Basu's work may provide a guide for this type of argument. Basu argues that people should respond to evidence in ways that take moral considerations into account. For example, Basu argues even if it is likely, given the demographics of a group, that a well-dressed Black person in a majority white club is a staff member, people should not believe that all the well-dressed Black people are staff members because merely believing this wrongs the Black members who are not staff.⁵²

Basu calls the view that people should take moral considerations into account when forming their beliefs "moral encroachment." A proponent of standpoint epistemology could appeal to the idea of moral encroachment and argue that there are moral reasons to give oppressed standpoints a credibility boost relative to people who speak from more privileged standpoints.⁵³ But this view would not succeed on solely epistemic grounds. Basu's argument may establish that they are *morally blameworthy* for giving privileged people a credibility boost, but it would not establish that they are epistemically negligent.

While standpoint epistemologists are correct to argue that people's experience of oppression is occasionally an epistemic credential, it is not always a credential, and it is not epistemically negligent to fail to give oppressed speakers a credibility boost. Moreover, it is far from clear that citing one's standpoint or expecting others to do the same is a reliable way to improve people's ability to track the truth.

V. CONCLUSION

I have focused on whether the standpoint expectation can deliver the epistemic benefits that standpoint epistemologists seek. The expectation fails to deliver the epistemic benefits of considering a person's standpoint because speakers can often lead listeners astray when they frame their speech in terms of their standpoint.

52. Rima Basu, *Radical Moral Encroachment: The Moral Stakes of Racist Beliefs*, 29 PHIL. ISSUES 9 (2019).

53. For an example of this strategy, see Briana Toole, *Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology*, 19 EPISTEME 47 (2020).

I also argued that it is a mistake for listeners to adopt a general policy of credibility boosting and blocking, even if they do it partly for moral reasons. In response to this argument, I considered the objection that there are many permissible ways to form beliefs, so credibility boosting and blocking because of a speaker's standpoint is not particularly objectionable from an epistemic standpoint. I think this is the best defense of the standpoint expectation, but it does not justify the specific practice of adopting the standpoint expectation as opposed to other approaches. In response to this argument, one may reply that there are moral reasons to adopt epistemic practices that avoid this. But this view is difficult to defend while maintaining a permissivist justification for credibility boosting and blocking.

To close, I will now consider some non-epistemic reasons for adopting the standpoint expectation, as well as some non-epistemic reasons against its adoption. In favor of the expectation, it is important to consider a speaker's standpoint to ensure that a deliberative group includes lots of different perspectives. Historically, a speaker's history or identity was often seen as disqualifying. Many groups still live with this historical legacy, and they have reasons to correct for it, not only for the epistemic benefits of including diverse perspectives but also for moral reasons. If there are compelling reasons to aim for diversity in group deliberations, it is correct to consider people's standpoints. Speakers may have reasons to disclose their histories and identities as a way of combating group-based stigmatization, presenting themselves as role models for people with similar standpoints, or as a way of promoting solidaristic relationships among group members.

Another non-epistemic benefit of the standpoint expectation is that people's histories are often very interesting, and it is fun to learn about where people come from and why they see the world the way they do. I am skeptical of the notion that people have group-based *duties* to assist people they share personal experiences with, especially when they did not voluntarily assume those duties by joining the group. But if it is the case that speakers are in a better position to benefit people if they make their standpoint salient to listeners, they have some moral reasons to do it.

There are also non-epistemic costs to the standpoint expectation, which, in light of the epistemic case against the expectation, contribute to the case for caution. Speakers may make themselves vulnerable to mistreatment if listeners cite their standpoint as a credibility blocker. To the extent that speakers are wronged by being denied credibility or silenced, credibility blocking can wrong speakers. Additionally, the standpoint expectation can cause listeners to over-generalize a person's speech and interpret it as if it is representative of an entire group. To the extent that it is wrong to treat people as token representatives of their identity groups, because it is objectifying or stigmatizing, then the standpoint expectation can prompt this kind of mistreatment.

The standpoint expectation is that when listeners ask people to share details of their personal histories or identities as a precondition to establishing credibility, this expectation can be invasive. For example, sexual violence victims may balk

at the expectation that they must disclose traumatic events from their past to establish credibility in conversations about sexual violence. Trans people may be reluctant to openly identify as trans in order to be heard as credible voices in discussions of trans healthcare or sexual discrimination. The standpoint expectation requires speakers to give up control over their self-presentation when they cite their background as a way of boosting their credibility. The standpoint expectation, therefore, puts speakers in a double bind. Either sacrifice your autonomy and control over your own personal narrative or cede your credibility.

Given that the standpoint expectation is both epistemically unreliable and morally risky, people have reason to avoid promoting this expectation. In practice, this means that people should instead support practices that provide people with options for anonymous participation in a conversation, anonymous authorship, and blind review. This argument can also support something like the right to be forgotten, not as a matter of public policy (where it is a form of governmental censorship) but as a policy for private media and technology companies. The same reasons that institutions cite in favor of policies like refraining from dead-naming transgender people are also reasons for a presumption against publicly revealing other aspects of people's standpoints.

The standpoint expectation is not primarily enforced through public policy, education, or commercial institutions. It is an informal social norm that governs speakers and listeners. Still, social norms can be unfair or harmful, and people should avoid upholding these norms when they are *on balance* counterproductive.⁵⁴ The difficulty with the standpoint expectation is that it may be justified in a very limited set of cases. But in spaces where the expectation has become pervasive, those who uphold it rarely make the case that a speaker's standpoint should boost or block their credibility in a conversation. This means that the social norms that prompt speakers to frame their claims in terms of their standpoints don't reliably produce more accurate beliefs for listeners.

However, social norms are difficult to shift. And it is especially tricky to shift social norms that are justified in some cases. Identifying the problem with the standpoint expectation is a small step toward creating more inclusive conversational communities—communities where a speaker's standpoint is neither a presumptive barrier nor a presumptive boost to their credibility.

54. See Aaron James, *Power in Social Organization as the Subject of Justice*, 86 PAC. PHIL. Q. 25 (2005).